CONSERVATION Showcase

Old Ways Die Hard

Old ways die hard, as the Los Lunas Plant Materials Center staff is finding as it is spreading the word about new riparian restoration technology that runs counter to traditional wisdom.

We all know how to plant a shrub … right? Dig a hole twice the size of the root ball, fill the hole with water and let it seep in, put the plant in so the top of the root ball is just at ground level, pack soil lightly around the root ball, water, and walk away. And to plant a large area, you enlist a whole bunch of Cub Scouts with shovels. Right? Wrong!

The traditional method of planting shrubs and trees does not work for riparian restoration projects, because riparian plants are dependent on a continuous water source that is only achieved when the roots are in contact with seepage from the stream or river bank. So, how do you achieve this? By deep planting long-stem specimens, according to Greg Fenchel, Los Lunas Plant Materials Center manager. And, he has the success to prove it.

A Carlsbad demonstration site is thriving under the tutelage of the Carlsbad Soil & Water Conservation District. This site, plunked right in the middle of the city's famous Christmas tour, is a one-acre spot that was planted with 20 cottonwood poles and 100 long-stem transplants in the winter of 2007. There were skeptics who felt the technology the Plant Materials Center uses, by augering holes six to seven feet deep, was only viable along the middle Rio Grande. This buries the plant's stem, which normally kills a specimen – but this is just not true for riparian species and runs contrary to conventional wisdom.

At the Carlsbad site many are amazed at how effective the demonstration is proving, and the Carlsbad Soil & Water Conservation District is taking the next vital step in riparian restoration and monitoring and treating the site for the first two years.

Weeds, like seven to eight foot kochia and dense sunflower patches, can block out the sun and kill the fledgling restoration specimens. Large insect infestations, like cottonwood beetles with a peaking population, can also destroy a newly rehabilitated site.

Greg Fenchel demonstrates how weeds like kochia and large patches of sunflowers can kill riparian restoration specimens.

So to attain its success the Plant Materials Center is taking several simple but critical steps, and getting results. It is planting long-stem specimens, not traditional commercial plants. It is using special equipment to auger six to seven feet holes so roots reach the capillary fringe of the water table, rather than shovels and people power. And, with the assistance of partners like the Carlsbad Soil & Water Conservation District it is monitoring and doing weed and pest control the first two years – after which it is possible to walk away.

Old ways die hard. But to overcome the feeling of being a voice in the wilderness, the Plant Materials Center is working with Natural Resources Conservation Services field offices to do five more demonstrations throughout the state in addition to the several sites it already has in place.

There are times successfully communicating a message is difficult. But it is critical that the Plant Materials Center experts who have the day-to-day experience of being in the bosque be heard, if sound riparian restoration is to be realized on a large scale.

NRCS
Natural Resources Conservation Service